

With over 200,000 dead from coronavirus

WHO warns that COVID-19 pandemic is resurgent across Europe

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The World Health Organization (WHO) warned Friday that the lifting of lockdown measures is driving a resurgence of COVID-19 in Europe. The rise in new cases is the product of stark class inequalities and the exploitation of migrant labor across the continent.

“The recent resurgence in COVID-19 cases in some countries following the easing of physical distancing measures is certainly cause for concern,” a WHO-Europe spokeswoman told AFP.

She said governments should prepare for large-scale lockdowns to prevent major new outbreaks: “Where new clusters of cases appear, these need to be controlled through rapid and targeted interventions including rapid case detection and isolation and diligent contact tracing and quarantining. ... If the situation demands, reintroduction of stricter, targeted measures with the full engagement of communities may be needed.”

Over the weekend, the number of dead in Europe from COVID-19 passed 200,000, as the number of officially registered European cases approaches 3 million. While it is surging across Eastern Europe—with over 5,000 daily new cases in Russia, and over 1,000 each in Ukraine and Romania—the number of daily COVID-19 deaths, however, at several hundreds, is well below the thousands who died daily this spring. Lockdowns across Western Europe blunted much of the pandemic’s impact. Since May 20, Europe has seen roughly 20,000 new cases per day, less than half the April peak.

The policy of the European Union (EU), entirely focused on using the pandemic as a pretext to hand multi-trillion-euro bailouts to the banks and major corporations, is, however, leading to disaster. As the pandemic spreads in Eastern Europe, the premature ending of lockdowns in the original centers of the pandemic in Western Europe is leading to a rapid resurgence of cases.

On Saturday, Romania saw a record 1,284 cases and Ukraine a near-record 1,106, as the far-right Ukrainian regime imposes IMF austerity measures and slashes social spending, forcing millions of Ukrainians to find work in central or western Europe. Many work as migrant farm labourers and are badly exposed due to appalling working conditions there—even in Europe’s wealthiest countries.

In Germany, 174 of 480 migrant agricultural labourers at a farm in the Bavarian village of Memming have tested positive for COVID-19. Security forces put the facility on lockdown and warned that the area around the farm may also go into lockdown. The workers infected in Memming are mostly Romanian migrant workers who were picking and treating cucumbers in large, closed facilities that likely helped spread the virus among the workers.

In Spain, protests broke out among migrant farm workers in the Castilla La Mancha region after 400 workers were forced into confinement in one outbreak near Albacete. Workers, many from West Africa, were housed collectively, without privacy or facilities to sleep and wash. The farm refused to provide accommodation, and hotels in the area refused to provide the workers rooms.

The College of Social Work of Castilla La Mancha issued a statement on this tragedy, stating: “The local administration never decided to carry out large-scale action to give the people residing there dignified conditions. It always looked the other way, even though it was necessary to do preventive work on many fronts, including public health. Given the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, did anyone really think this could not happen?”

A report by Euronews, *Der Spiegel*, Lighthouse Reports, and Médiapart, titled “Invisible workers: Underpaid, exploited and put at risk on Europe’s farms,”

reveals the appalling working conditions facing many of the 9.7 million people working in agriculture in Europe.

Juan, a Colombian youth hired by a subcontractor to work at a French farm, recalled how other workers first greeted him: “‘Welcome to hell,’ I remember being told. And I thought it was a joke. But when they opened the door and I saw the house ... it was a disaster.” Workers paid €200 monthly for rent in the house, where they were packed five to a room, sharing bunk beds, in violation of labour law. No bed sheets or pillows were provided for the beds, or toilet paper in the restrooms.

Such reports expose the boundless class arrogance of the financial aristocracy and its petty bourgeois accomplices in the union bureaucracy who set social policy in Europe. As the European Central Bank prints €1.25 trillion to give to the banks to bail out the super-rich, and state officials squabble over how to divide up €750 billion in EU corporate bailouts, they treat workers with contempt.

EU officials have admitted that farm labourers, hypocritically hailed as “essential workers” by the capitalist media, are treated little better than slaves—with deadly consequences. “At the moment, we have this crazy situation where we actually have better protection for animals than for some of these workers on our farms,” Daniel Freund, a German Green member of the European parliament observed.

This exposes deep flaws of Europe’s lockdowns. Lockdown measures were implemented only after a wave of wildcat strikes in March in Italy and growing strikes across Europe. However, this by itself could not totally stop the pandemic. During the lockdowns, conditions in farms and other workplaces guaranteed that the disease would keep spreading among super-exploited “essential workers” employed to prevent a collapse in food supplies.

The impact of the premature ending of lockdowns is now being felt. Though the number of new daily cases fell to a few dozen in many Western European countries after this spring’s lockdowns, they are now rising rapidly in Germany (781 on Saturday), France (1,130), and Spain (2,255). “The second wave has arrived,” wrote Germany’s *Tagesspiegel*, adding: “Since mid-May the number of new cases had regularly fallen. But now cases are clearly rising, even where there are no hot-spots.”

After Catalonia proposed a “voluntary” lockdown on 4 million people in Barcelona, Jean-François Delfraissy, the head of France’s Scientific Council, said France could soon see similar levels.

Warning that France could “fall into something like

Spain, Catalonia,” he pointed to working class areas housing many immigrants doing essential work. He stressed his concern for “precarious populations and those that can fall into precarious social conditions. The north Paris suburbs are worse hit than any other area, and French people of foreign origin have far higher mortality rates.” He said, “if we allow Covid infections in these populations to grow, it will spread throughout the population.”

Nevertheless, the EU firmly opposes further lockdowns and demands stark austerity measures and massive cuts to jobs, to finance the trillions of euros being forked over to the super-rich.

On Saturday, French Prime Minister Jean Castex ruled out large-scale lockdowns. “We now know what that produces: it stops the spread of the pandemic, of course, but from an economic and social standpoint it’s a disaster,” he said, adding that only “very localized lockdowns” could be considered. French President Emmanuel Macron has already said that millions of workers will lose their jobs in France alone, and that there will be many bankruptcies to finance EU bailouts for the rich.

To speak more plainly, Castex and the European capitalist class behind him oppose stopping the spread of COVID-19 because this “disaster” stops the flow of profits to their pockets. By preferring death and profits to life and health, they have exposed their own bankruptcy and shown that only a movement of the working class for equality, for worker control of production and for the taking of political power by the working class on a socialist platform can halt the pandemic.



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